

SUNSHINE ADVISORY

A Bulletin on Iowa Open Meetings and Public Records Laws

By Attorney General Tom Miller -- March 2008

Retreats and “Working Sessions” are Open Meetings

Public bodies occasionally schedule retreats or “working sessions” separate from regularly-scheduled meetings in order to discuss policy issues or examine new ideas. These events can help a public body to focus its mission. But retreats and working sessions are covered by Iowa’s Open Meetings Law and cannot be held in private unless grounds exist to close the session.

Here are some legal guidelines for holding retreats or working sessions (Iowa Code Ch. 21):

- **Discussions of policy issues -- even when no votes are taken -- are covered by the Open Meetings Law.** A key purpose of Iowa’s Open Meetings Law is to open the *deliberative process* to the public as well as votes. A meeting is covered if a quorum of the public body deliberates on matters within the scope of the body’s policy-making duties.
- **Retreats and working sessions should be held at a location accessible to the public.** All meetings, including retreats and working sessions, must be held at a place reasonably accessible to the public. The public body may select a more casual location than is generally used for regularly-scheduled meetings, as long as the public has reasonable access.
- **Agenda materials should be provided to members of the public, unless confidential.** Copies of agenda materials should be provided to members of the public upon request -- just like agenda materials for any regularly-scheduled meeting. Documents may be withheld only if confidential under a specific provision of law.
- **Agendas may include a social break, such as lunch or dinner, in connection with retreats or working sessions.** As long as the social break is truly just social and not a continuation of deliberation on policy matters, the social break is not part of the meeting subject to the Open Meetings Law.

Officials and citizens alike should be familiar with the rules for holding retreats or working sessions to assure public access to the policy deliberations that often are the heart and soul of sound government.

This Advisory was first issued in November 2002. Citizens who have inquiries or complaints about public records or open meetings may call the Iowa Citizens’ Aide/Ombudsman Office – toll-free at 888-IA-OMBUD (888-426-6283.)

“Sunshine Advisory” bulletins provide information on Iowa’s public records and open meetings laws – our “Sunshine Laws.” The bulletins are a resource for public officials and citizens. Local officials should obtain legal advice from their counsel, such as the city or county attorney.



Iowa Attorney General’s Office: Hoover Building, Des Moines, Iowa 50319.

On the Web: www.IowaAttorneyGeneral.org (Click on “open government.”)